



Fairfield University Egan School
of Nursing and Health Studies

SANA: Self-Achievement through Nursing Art

Volume 1
Issue 1 *The Inaugural Issue*

Article 3

2020

Star Boy

Paula Sergi

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Recommended Citation

Sergi, Paula (2020) "Star Boy," *SANA: Self-Achievement through Nursing Art*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/sana/vol1/iss1/3>

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Star Boy

Cover Page Footnote

This article is an excerpt from Paula Sergi's manuscript - Star Boy. Acknowledgement - Elegy for my Son's Abandoned Music Career was published in Grit, Gravity and Grace: New Poems About Health Care - College of Physicians of Philadelphia Paula Sergi is the author of three poetry chapbooks and editor of three anthologies. She's the recipient of a Wisconsin Arts Board Artist Fellowship and was selected as The Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters cultural ambassador to Germany, where she spent three months teaching creative writing. Her poetry is published regularly in such journals as Witness, The Bellevue Literary Review, and The American Journal of Nursing. She holds an MFA in creative writing from Vermont College and a BSN from the University of Wisconsin, Madison.



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Manuscript 1019

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Star Boy

*Often a star
waited for you to espy it and sense its light.
A wave rolled toward you out of the distant past,
or as you walked below an open window,
a violin gave itself to your hearing.*

Rainer Maria Rilke (second elegy)

Family Night at Rehab

They are pasty and fidgeting,
not quite committed to sitting in chairs.

At this moment there's nothing to do
but be here in their heavy chains

drinking weak coffee. We, the broken families,
drive for hours with sharpened pencils

to take notes, support our fading
loved ones. They're not dead yet

but not quite living, either, reeking
of cigarettes, unlaundered sweatshirts, greasy hair.

We're beyond slamming doors,
beyond shock and tears, beyond our savings,

hearing how their worlds' unknotted,
and the rough statistics, only twenty-five per cent

survive. We learn there's no predicting who.
We have nothing left to say to one another

(it's our second go around in rehab)
so he tries to make a joke about the checklist

of factors on the addiction handout:
family history, depression, anxiety,

peers using drugs, early drug use, risk takers.
Look, mom, he says, I hit every one.

Elegy for my Son's Abandoned Music Career

What I miss most are the old jazz standards,
someone's heart stomped flat or shattered,
reminding me I'm not the only fool
for love. The tunes so pure I'd smell
spilled booze and smoke, when I visited
his college apartment on weekends, though
there was none of that as he practiced,
only mysterious plastic bags the size
of postage stamps, highs and lows
confounding me, a perfect score or none at all,
panic before each gig or school performance.

I'd sway to the music out of sight
so as not to embarrass myself
or distract him from fingering the strings, coaxing
chromatic movements, repeating notes to build
melodic tension. The tension
was immense-- one day he's okay,
the next he's sick in bed.

I miss the warped versions of these old songs,
thick black LP's from my father's jazz collection
left too long in a dank basement, and how
he'd have loved seeing my son's fingers
trained on patterns, hearing fresh interpretations.
He'd wonder, too, how the music disappeared
note by fading note, frayed strings and sheet music
yellowing in the attic, stylus stuck and skipping.

Section 3

Scenes from an American Drama

Characters: Mother of client. Therapist. Client.

Scene One

Stage directions: Middle aged woman speaking to audience from behind the steering wheel of her Audi.

MOTHER:

When I drive him to his therapist, he asks me to wait in the car. (His beater car off limits since he lost it one night in the city.)

The building would never be featured in Chicago's architectural tour, its rectangular shape, the ugly brick and tiny high windows could be a substitute for a jail or an elementary school in the city. If I were a mouse at their meeting, or a centipede, a silverfish, a daddy long legs spider, okay, even a cockroach, this is what I might overhear.

This is what the characters are thinking.

Scene Two

Stage directions: Female therapist in drab professional clothes sitting behind a desk. Client sits on a desk chair with wheels, wearing blue jeans and a tee shirt. He fidgets and rolls around as he replies to questions.

THERAPIST: So how's it going today?

Two weeks out of hospital. I see dark circles under his eyes.

CLIENT: I'm doing pretty well right now, I think.

Nothing bothers me like therapy.

THERAPIST: Your physical symptoms?

CLIENT: Fine.

It's so chilly in this barren room.

THERAPIST: Have you been to any AA meetings?

CLIENT: I wish there were a meeting close to me.

I'm never going back to one of those. Middle-aged alcoholic women from Lake Forest don't get me.

THERAPIST: What do you do to relax?

Other than pot and heroin.

CLIENT: I'm looking for a yoga class right now. My mother bought me a new yoga mat.

Which I'll never use.

THERAPIST: There's a yoga class across the street from here. Monday, I think.

I'll have to get a ride for him I guess. His mother isn't living here full time.

CLIENT: I need to practice for my gig that day.

I can't see how those moves would help me now.

THERAPIST: How's the music coming?

His lame excuse again.

CLIENT: Excellent!

I probably won't feel so good next week. Unless I score. But I'm not planning to.

THERAPIST: Anything else that I should know?

I need to get my nails done pretty soon.

CLIENT: I want to learn to meditate as well

Twenty minutes must be up by now.

THERAPIST: Schedule another visit with me on your way out.

If you can remember to.

CLIENT: Sure thing.

I don't want to see her any more. It doesn't fucking help.

Scene Three

Mother and client converse in mother's car.

MOTHER: How'd it go?

SON: Pretty well.

Scene Four: Closing Monologue.

Stage directions: After the client leaves his therapist's office, the therapist turns to the audience. Large, framed placards appear as wall hangings. Directions from a seed packet are printed on the placards. She reads them to the audience, pausing after each to deliver her comments.

Plant in early spring. Full sun.

THERAPIST: Because spring in these parts comes late and lasts about two days (May 30 and 31st) I long to be among living things, growing things. I start seedlings in my office between appointments. The instructions on the seed packet read: *Plant in early spring. Full sun.*

There's a sour scent that surrounds my clients, addicts all. I'm glad I never had one. A child.

When is early spring? It's April first and snowing. Full sun seems a long way off.

Sow in average soil

THERAPIST: That's what we have here in the Midwest: plenty of average. It's an attitude that shouts, or, rather, whispers, we are average here. Hold to that.

Don't put yourself above anyone else.

Firm lightly

THERAPIST: Maybe this is where parents go wrong. How lightly to firm seedlings, off-sprouts, children? Maybe parents never read far enough in the instructions.

Trust, instead, to follow their hearts.

Keep evenly moist

THERAPIST: As if anything can be "kept." Kept evenly. One thing we know: the seedlings will emerge somehow. Even in average soil. Even in poor.

E Mail

From: Charles Le Claire, Lead Counselor

To: Vanessa Aublanc

Subject: Rough week at the Center

Hey, Vanessa,

Charles here. Sorry to have been out of touch the last week or so. I did mean to call you sooner, sweetie, but an e-mail will have to do for now.

It's been a rotten week at the Center. On Monday I interviewed a prospective client for our live-in program. He came with his mother, a gal in her late fifties with a hippie sort of attitude about her: long peace sign earrings, jeans and a sweater that has seen better days. I may have detected patchouli on her. I will say that she shows concern: she has those blue-black circles under her eyes, and bags as well.

Instead of taking my advice and placing the kid in our live-in unit, she's talking about moving down here from Podunk Wisconsin to live with the junkie lad so that he can resume taking college course work. He's supposedly a musician, but if he doesn't shake this problem, he'll be a dead duck before graduation. They claim that his psychiatrist back in Wisco, AKA "slack-jaw county," recommends that he focus on his music and return to school.

So I accept him into our outpatient program. The first night he's here, we do a routine urine test, and the results are staggering: he's apparently ingested whatever he could get his hands on over the weekend back home. And he drove himself over here. I had to call Mrs. Stoney and give her the news. She seemed flabbergasted that her baby would (still, or again) do such a thing, but she did agree to take a cab to retrieve him.

Tuesday was family night, and you won't believe (wait till I tell you) what happened.

Mrs. Stoney's Journal

The address indicates a building with an old stone façade. It was once a private home. I find parking, not too far away in this neighborhood of brownstones. The snow is mixing with sleet, and I take care not to slip. I'm buzzed in at the door by an invisible power. No one else in view, so I wait in a room that might have been the parlor. The furniture is ornate: a sofa and love seat, wooden legs, rich, paisley fabric- I think they call chintz. Table lamps give off soft, warm light. The large fireplace mantel is festooned with fresh pine boughs and red velvet ribbons: Christmas is not far away. In case we have to talk about things in the meeting, I've passed on the magazines with shiny covers, and make a list.

First time in Cook County jail (where being handsome holds no advantage).

Finding attorney #1

First court appearance

Driving around Chicago, searching for his car

First car accident

First ambulance ride

First trip to the ER

1,241 panic attacks, as judged by phone calls home (Do you think I'll be late for work?) Do you think my shirt is pressed well enough? Why did I take this job? I have a performance tonight and I'm not prepared.)

First outpatient program

Thanksgiving from hell

Family meetings

Emptying home of any alcohol

Trips to psychologist, Milwaukee

Trips to psychiatrist, Milwaukee

First in-patient rehab

Trips to psychologist, Chicago

Trips to psychiatrist, Chicago

Finding attorney #2 (#1 didn't call back)

Sleepless nights (365 per year for four years)

Panic at the sound of the phone

Family night, family night, family night

Funeral for brother, dead from addiction

Funeral for cousin #1, dead from addiction

Funeral for cousin #2, dead from addiction

Janelle's alcoholism

Another Family Night

A counselor appears. I recognize him from our intake interview. He's wearing gabardine slacks, perfectly tailored, Allen Edmond loafers, a maroon cashmere vee neck sweater over crisp white oxford shirt. Maybe it's his hair that gives him a striking resemblance to Alec Baldwin's character in *30 Rock*. His head has that confident tilt. He calls himself Charles LeClaire, but I'd like to call him "Chuck." Behind him, a string of ordinary people. They're walking away from the parlor, down a hall and I assume Family Night is about to begin. The posh building does little to hide the awful truth: we're here to confront the nasty antics of our loved ones.

Under fluorescent lights, one or two of the clients drift in. Acrid cigarette smoke embedded in their clothing and hair, from their break between group session and this meeting. I haven't yet sat down when another rushes in. "Someone's having a seizure on the sidewalk."

I follow the others outside, feeling numb. He's lying in the snow. He stares blankly out from somewhere, at the night sky, with a look that says he doesn't recognize what's happening. Now I know what the cliché means: like a deer in headlights. I cup his head to protect it from the snowy shush. His beard is thin, almost blond, his light brown curls frame a handsome face, a roman nose at the center.

"Do you know him?" someone asks. I nod and hold his head in my hands until the paramedics arrive.

"Lucky to be alive," they say.

Welcome to the ER

He's on a gurney in the common area. Uniformed people rushing about. My face feels like granite: the ambulance ride did little to calm me. I'm in panic mode, and wonder if this stone-faced façade covers my fear. ER workers don't like fear—they will not acknowledge it, maybe to remain calm themselves, pretend not to feel it. We wait in the hallway for a room. He vomits all over his clothes, so I grab a nearby basin. Finally a nurse appears. She's wearing a smock with little pink hearts and earrings in the shape of crosses. Her name tag says, "Nanci." I know this type, and imagine what her notes reveal.

Nanci's nursing notes, employing the standard SOAP charting.

Subjective: Mother states he uses heroin. Patient unable to give a history. Fellow junkies supposedly observed patient having a seizure.

Objective: Patient has shaking chills and is vomiting. Mother's cheeks are flush, and she's looking down at her feet.

Assessment: Likely heroin addiction and overdose. (Junkie. No wonder the mother feels shame. Jack and I will not make the same mistake. Already at four, our son Jason understands consequences, how they're very unpleasant. Kids are like seedlings: you have to shape them. My dad always said "To grow a tree straight, you have to stake it." My son will be staked by the crucifix of Jesus.)

Plan: Run every test available, including spinal tap (it scares the shit out of them). Psych consult. Neurology consult. No opiates or other meds. (Let him detox on the ward for a couple of days.) The neurologist will say "You're lucky to be alive."

I pace the hallways, not wanting to watch withdrawal, not wanting to take that kind of abuse. Again.

Rock Bottom

Where is rock bottom, anyway?
We're waiting. He looks
under the subway, between tracks,
even in another fluorescent meeting
of smoke embedded stories, as if listening
could thread his way back.
Might he find it in his mitochondria,
a single cell under microscope,
dank basements, filthy apartment sofas,
alone, some friends are missing,
comfort uninhabitable with pressure building like
roiling volcanic magna,
just enough cash for a one-way
ticket home in hand, hand in hand
in everything. Fears what he will not become:
recovering.

All Rise, Court is Now in Session

Let the record show that I'm an expensive attorney.

Let the record show that my client is wearing a dark suit and tie unlike any other person in the room, except his father and me.

Let the record show that no one else in the courtroom has hired private counsel.

Let the record show that the honorable Madame Judge flashed a smile at my client.

Let the record show that my client's parents are both professionals, and that they are both here with him today, by his side, all the way from Wisconsin.

Let the record show that my client is the only white boy in court today.

Let the record show that the judge said to my client "you're lucky to be alive."

Let the record show that one boy, about seventeen, is alone in court today, without parents or counsel or a suit.

Let the record show my client is completing a degree from the Chicago Center for Performing Arts and has a bright future serving tables.

Let the record show that he is the only person whose case is being dismissed today.

Let the record show that he cannot spend more than a weekend at his home in Wisconsin because the surroundings and former friends call him back to his junkie self.

Let the record show that my client will leave the country after graduation.

Let the record show he'll choose to live in a third world country with little infrastructure, poor plumbing and no health care, feeling lucky, for now, to be alive.

Epilogue

The Road Finally Taken

After Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in his ravaged life
and knowing he could not travel both
and be alive, long he stood
at a broken door

on the south side, far from the tidy
stone walls of university,
from florescent lights
of rehab, from the family home

reading again his brother's text
*Come with me to a village
we've never seen, to people
we've never met*

then answered yes
and hailed a cab
and that has made
all the difference.

